

The Database of Religious History and the Study of Ancient Mediterranean Religiosity

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The Database of Religious History (DRH; <http://religiondatabase.org>) constitutes a major undertaking that will collect information on religious groups that span space and time, cultures and histories. The chief aim of the DRH is to bring together, in a systematic and open-access format, data on religious groups—both past and present—from across the globe. This opens for historians new and exciting avenues of research, many of which complement and cohere with existing qualitative/descriptive research practices, others of which supplement and even expand beyond those practices. In this paper I direct attention toward the function and utility of the DRH when studying expressions of religion within a specific geo-temporal locale (namely, the ancient Mediterranean) and the many expressions of religion that exist therein (namely, ancient Mediterranean religiosity). My aim is twofold. On the one hand, I will demonstrate the utility of the DRH, specifically showing how this database project engages the historical record and the nature of historical sources. On the other hand, I will highlight a specific problem within the scholarly study of ancient Mediterranean religion(s), to which the DRH offers promising avenues of analysis. Though the topical focus of this paper is not oriented toward cognitive historiography *per se*, the methodological commitments of the following discussion are clearly at home in the field. Both of the aforementioned aims necessitate an interdisciplinary intersection where religious studies, history, digital humanities, and quantitative analyses can intersect; cognitive historiography is precisely that interdisciplinary intersection.

As a field of academic inquiry, the study of comparative antique religions is still in its infancy (Spaeth, 2013b). To be certain, scores of work have been done on the localized and

cultural nature of ancient religious expressions. Standard reference works such as Barbette Spaeth (2013a) or Sarah Iles Johnston ((2004); (2007)) include chapters on religion in Rome, religion in Greece, religion in Egypt, early Christianity, ancient Judaism, and the like. But, to treat the ancient Mediterranean as a whole, and to look at the religious landscape of the ancient Mediterranean as a coherent (or incoherent) cultural ecosystem is only now emerging as a *bona fide* field of study. The Society for Ancient Mediterranean Religions, for example, was established only in 2008. Similarly, it is only in the last 15 years or so that scholarly treatments dedicated to ancient Mediterranean religions have begun to appear (notably, Spaeth (2013a); Johnston (2004), (2007); and Orlin (2016)). Within the context of this emerging field, a scholarly tool such as the DRH—which can function as a repository of scholarly knowledge—provides novel ways of cataloguing and exploring the breadth of religious expression in the ancient Mediterranean. Put differently, the field of comparative antique religions is ripe and readily amenable to the kind of targeted work enabled by the DRH.

The DRH, however, has more and better utility than just a repository of scholarly knowledge. Indeed, it allows scholars to engage in quantitative analyses of the historical record, both to test current theories and to help establish new theories in religious and cultural studies. Here the DRH's utility within the emerging field of comparative antique religions shows great potential. One of the recurrent questions in this field centres on the definition of how we are to understand “ancient Mediterranean religion.” Is it best, for example, to speak of ancient Mediterranean *religions* (in the plural), or are we justified in speaking of ancient Mediterranean *religion* (in the singular) as a distinct and coherent expression of human religiosity (e.g., Graf (2004); Chaniotis (2005)). Angelos Chaniotis (2005: 142) has articulated the question well:

Can the Mediterranean in its entirety be a meaningful and distinctive object of study in any given period of the antiquity [sic], given the heterogeneity of cultures and environments in this geographical region? And if continuities, convergences, and homogeneities can somehow be

detected in a non-anthropogenous framework—for example there *is* such a thing as a Mediterranean climate, we can study Mediterranean seismic activities, and we know from personal observation the Mediterranean karstic landscapes—can we characterize cultural phenomena as ‘Mediterranean phenomena’? Is there such a thing as a Mediterranean mentality, a Mediterranean way of life, typical Mediterranean cultic practices or rituals, or even Mediterranean values? These questions sound rhetorical. Most of us would spontaneously deny the existence of a Mediterranean culture, a Mediterranean religion or a Mediterranean way of life, perhaps only making allowances for certain historical periods or certain limited aspects. It is necessary to rethink what is specifically ‘Mediterranean’ in Mediterranean studies, to distinguish between objects and observation and constructs—but also to ask ourselves if there is any legitimacy for Mediterranean studies other than the natural geographical limits of this closed sea, and if yes, which parameters we should take into consideration.

At the time of his writing, Chaniotis (2005: 143) admits that no one has ever suggested “there is a ‘Mediterranean’ religion or that there is anything specifically Mediterranean in the religions of the ancient Mediterranean.” Chaniotis himself is not interested in offering such a suggestion; his aim is to chart a more comparative path, one that explores avenues of (dis-)continuity between antique ritual practices. In this way he falls in line with the prevailing scholarly discourse which seeks to describe “continuities, survivals, and similarities” between the various religious phenomena spread across and around the Mediterranean Sea (Chaniotis, 2005: 143). Fritz Graf (2004) appears to share Chaniotis’s sympathies. While his essay “What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?” seeks to give some definition to the cultural phenomenon, in the end his conclusion falls to the side of cultural plurality; so Graf (2004: 14 emphasis added):

I have regarded the *religions* of the ancient Mediterranean world as being in constant contact with each other—a contact that, similar to that of languages in contact, resulted both in assimilation and in dissimilation. I have not looked for specific characteristics of “the” religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, beyond their being in almost constant contact; in fact, this, to me, seems their main characteristic. This is a rather minimalist approach. I am not looking for unique characteristics, those traits that would differentiate the religions of the ancient Mediterranean from, say, the religions of Southeast Asia or of Mesoamerica. To look for such unique traits is cultural studies too often proves elusive and is motivated as often by ideological longings as by distinct scholarly concerns. Rather, I am looking for characteristics that would confirm the relative unity that would justify the enterprise of studying these different religious cultures together in one vast project.

I cite both Chaniotis and Graf at length because their inclinations toward something that we might call Mediterranean *religion* (in the singular) demonstrates both the developing nature of the field, and its current methodological limits. Developing because the field is still quite

youthful, and limited because the current tools available to scholars for concretely and cogently defining ancient Mediterranean religiosity are restricted in their scope. As with most fields in the humanities, assessment of “continuities, survivals, and similarities” fall to the intuitions and judgments of the individual scholar him/herself. When assessing large-scale cultural phenomena such as the religious landscape of the ancient Mediterranean, the traditional model of individual scholars amassing all the information so as to produce a global perspective is simply impossible. Perhaps for this reason, recent encyclopedia such as Johnston (2004) and Orlin (2016) have employed editorial boards of nine and five members respectively.

While Graf takes a more secure, self-admittedly “minimalist” approach that stresses cultural diversity, there nevertheless persists scholarly inclinations toward thinking of Mediterranean *religion* in the singular. Pragmatically speaking, this became clear to the DRH editors at a 2014 workshop hosted by the Peter Wall Institute at the University of British Columbia. It was at this event that the DRH team first solicited database entries for the ancient Mediterranean, encouraging historians to create an entry of their own design for some sector of ancient Mediterranean religiosity. To our surprise, two different scholars working in distinct fields independently created entries that spanned the whole of the Mediterranean basin with temporal boundaries ranging 1000 years (for example, see Figure. 1).

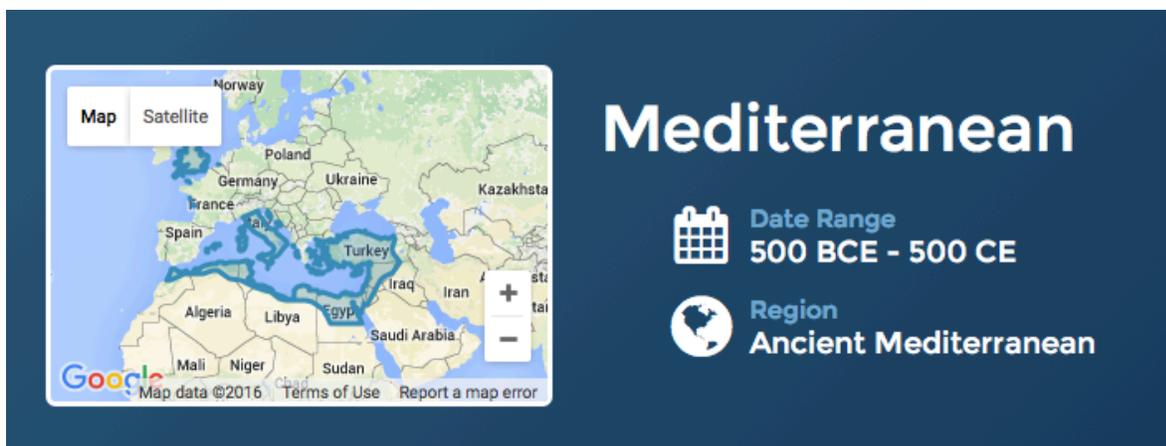


Figure 1.

I will return to these entries toward the end of this paper; for now, however, it is worth noting that the efforts of these contributors were in keeping with the current scholarly inclination toward understanding religion in the ancient Mediterranean as possessing a coherence and singularity. Rather than speaking of ancient Mediterranean *religions* (in the plural), one of these contributors insisted that we must speak of a “general religious field” that permeates all sectors of Mediterranean society and lived experience. And indeed, this point is widespread within the study of ancient history; as Orlin (2016: xvii) remarks, “it is widely recognized that religion was not perceived as a separate sphere in the ancient world, but that religion, politics, and social customs were tightly intertwined.” Accordingly, if one wants to try to capture ancient Mediterranean religiosity, at some level it must be seen in a totalizing way. In many respects, this is in step with Graf’s exploration of how Mediterranean religions are in constant contact and interpenetration with one another, and of Chaniotis’s focus on ritual (dis-)continuities.

In order to make headway on a question as large as, “is there such a thing as ancient Mediterranean religion,” a tool such as the DRH opens promising avenues in at least three ways. First, the presentation of historical information within a database context renders such data amenable to mathematical and statistical analyses. Ultimately, this changes the type of analysis available to historians. As a tool for the humanities, such analytical potential complements, refines, and perhaps even bolsters the intuitions of the historian, thus expanding the range of tools available for historical study. Second, by capturing religion variables as they are anchored in space and time rather than subsuming those variables *a priori* under specific traditions and/or cultures, we thus are able to identify commonalities and differences that cut across the usual cultural, traditional, and communal boundaries. This promises a more secure grounding in which to assess levels of coherence and difference across the spectrum of religious expression in the

ancient Mediterranean. Finally, the global and temporal nature of the DRH means that region-specific data for the ancient Mediterranean can be brought into quantitative comparison with like data for other temporal periods and geographical regions, thus assessing levels of similarity, coherence, and/or difference between religious expressions. This also will allow us to look for distinctly Mediterranean features of religious expression, and thus make concrete judgements regarding the existence of Mediterranean religion (in the singular) in light of largescale comparison. In short, while traditional approaches rely upon the historian's own intuition in assessing questions of religious novelty/similarity—here, the minimalist approaches of Chaniotis and Graf are to be applauded—the DRH promises to provide a more robust tool for tipping the balance in scholarly debate.

Another chief contribution of the DRH is that it allows us to expand beyond the siloed nature of traditional qualitative approaches to large historical problems. Sarah Iles Johnston's magisterial *Religions of the Ancient World* (Belknap, 2004) provides an interesting case in point. After a series of essays that introduce major themes in the field, the work progresses into a section titled "Histories"—which has individual chapters on religion in Rome, religion in Greece, religion in Egypt, early Christianity, and the like—and finally into a section titled "Key Topics," which continues the geographic foci in order to explore common themes such as "time and space," "religious personnel," "sacrifice," and the like. Within this layout, which is geared toward descriptive comparison, no attention is given to the kind of synthesis needed to assess the distinct Mediterraneanisms of Mediterranean religion(s). More recent works have moved in this direction; notably, Spaeth (2013a) balances geographic localization with thematic synthesis, while contributors to Orlin (2016: xviii) were instructed "to explore—where possible—both commonalities among the different religious traditions and the difference between them."

Regarding the later, though moving in the right direction, Orlin (2016: xviii) ultimately is a reference work and as such the editors “felt that encyclopedia entries were not the appropriate place for extend argumentation about cultural influence or the lack thereof [between (dis-)similar religious expressions].” Accordingly, the synoptic orientation of these works enables descriptive comparison but does not facilitate the drawing of conclusions about ancient Mediterranean religiosity specifically. Pragmatically speaking, a move such as the latter is only possible within the context of a quantitative database such as the DRH, where individual data-points can be identified and mapped across individual entries for specific religious groups.

For many, however, demarcating the “religious group” in the ancient Mediterranean proves the most difficult task of all. As Jan Bremmer (1999: 2) remarks of Greek religion: “religion was totally embedded in society—no sphere of life lacked a religious aspect.” This means that, when composing a DRH entry for a specific “group,” much is left to the individual historian him/herself to demarcate. If it is possible to partition specific expressions of religion, in many ways this partitioning is artificial and imposed from the outside. This should not deter us, however, from such a project, for the religious “groups” we identify effectively constitute heuristic models that provide convenient ways of organizing and orienting the data. In this sense, then, the “groups” we are capturing are our own construction, and DRH contributors are asked to self-consciously balance etic and emic categories when giving definition to such groups.

The definition of “group” that the DRH works with is quite flexible (see further (Sullivan et al., 2017)). The term “group” is used in the most neutral sense; it could refer to a “community,” “network,” “clan,” or any other configuration of people who are practicing in the same/similar way(s). Practice is the key component here. Our interests are, as much as possible, in capturing what actual people were doing on the ground, and our goal is to have entries that

reflect religion as it was practiced, not religion as it was ideally constructed. One is on a stronger footing if he/she does not think narrowly of “groups” as tight, closed, and exclusive social units. Such an approach is unhelpfully anachronistic, indebted to idealised 19th century models of social cohesion (cf. Stowers, 2011) and thus it unduly limits the amount of data that one can collect. Indeed, the historical record would prove quite frustrating to work with such a rigid definition of “groups,” as our categorical rubric would not fit the social and religious textures of the ancient Mediterranean.¹ But, if one thinks of “groups” in a more generous way as loose, open, porous social units, and if one conceives of “groups” as including individuals whose identities contain multiple religious commitments and affiliations, then he/she can work much more fruitfully with ancient Mediterranean evidence.

Given this working definition of a “religious group,” DRH editors seek to populate the database with entries that are temporally and spatially more discrete. Entries such as “Pauline Christianity,” “Religion in Attica,” and “Mithraism” (see figures 2, 3, and 4) are prime examples in that they each seek to negotiate the many considerations that go into defining a “religious group.”²

¹ This point has been stressed by Stowers (2011) with respect to early Christ-believing groups; he says: “The concept of community and communities has been enormously constraining for scholarship on ancient Christianity. Community is a highly ideal and ideological concept”; and later “In my estimation, it is very unlikely that the ‘Corinthians’ ever had any more social organization than households that may have had previous ties with other households and, after Paul, a roughly shared knowledge that Paul wanted them to be an *ekklēsia* in Christ and that he kept telling them that God had transformed them into one.”

² These entries can be browsed online that DRH site: “Pauline Christianity”: <http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=196#/>; “Religion in Attica”: <http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=198#/>; and “Mithraism”: <http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=199#/>.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

For example, the “Pauline Christianity” entry, which was compiled by the present author, meets the following criteria: (a) this “group” is defined from a reasonably circumscribed collection of ancient texts (namely, the undisputed Pauline epistles) that are connected one-to-another by a single religious actor (namely, the apostle Paul); (b) this constructed “group” is reasonably coherent in that most or all of the DRH questions can be answered consistently across the source

documents;³ (c) though the “group” is temporally very small, it evinces a coherence and rigour of demarcation that makes it appropriate for the DRH; and (d) all of this means that the “group” itself is a heuristic construction of the scholarly imagination, one that provides a way of organising like-expressions of religious practice within a specific temporal and spatial area of the ancient Mediterranean.

The Pauline Christianity entry serves as an example of a specific religious “group” in a specific historical period. But the historical record is not always amenable to such “group” demarcation, and historians are often more accustomed to working with texts, archaeological sites, material culture, and other remains that do not necessarily betray clearly identifiable “groups.” Indeed, the boundaries and even the coherence of the “Pauline Christianity” entry is open for debate and will likely be contested by my colleagues in the field of Christian origins.⁴ Given the nature of the historical record, the DRH team is currently envision a series of new polls that are oriented around “Places,” “Texts,” “Supernatural Beings,” and “Rituals” (see further (Sullivan et al., 2017)). The idea of these polls is to make the DRH amenable to the kinds of sources that historians work with; within the database, these polls would sit alongside the existing “group” poll, and all polls would be integrated by virtue of spatio-temporal tagging. To

³ It is for this reason that the so-called deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles are excluded as evidence for the “Pauline Christianity” entry. These pseudepigraphical letters, which occasion much scholarly doubt concerning their authenticity vis-à-vis the undisputed letters of Paul, complicate the dataset and thus produce too many one-off variables that require nuance.

⁴ The full parameters of the entry itself, including the date, the geography, and the difficulty of gleaning actual practices from sources such as the undisputed Pauline epistles are all disputed points (albeit, to varying degrees). To this we must recognize two points: (1) DRH entries are scholarly constructs, and thus must fall prey to the same scrutiny as other scholarly productions, and (2) the structure of the DRH is such that individual entries can be challenged by the wider scholarly community, and the DRH also allows for the existence of multiple entries alongside each other within the database. On this latter point, the DRH is designed to host numerous, independently authored entries for the same religious group. For example, there currently are three different entries in the DRH for Pauline Christianity: one by Anders Petersen (<http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=182#/>), one by Andrew Tobolowsky (<http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=341#/>), and one by the current author (<http://religiondatabase.org/browse/entity/?entity=196#/>). By hosting independent entries on the same group, users of the database are able to perform reliability checks between like-entries, which allows us to assess the strength of our data and also to gauge scholarly agreement/disagreement.

these ends, contributors to the DRH are encouraged to work as precisely as possible, focusing their efforts on specific historical data-points.

At this point it is worth returning to the two “Mediterranean Religion” entries noted above (recall figure 1). By all accounts, the “Mediterranean Religion” entries are more expansive—temporally, chronologically, and socially—than the three entries just noted (that is, they cover the whole of the Mediterranean over a period of 1000+ years, including all cultures and religious expressions therein). As already stated, these entries were among the first solicited for the DRH, and their creation helped refine the DRH project in at least two ways. First, their spatio-temporal breadth reflected a failure on the part of DRH editors to provide sufficient guidance to contributing scholars, particularly with respect to the design and parameters of DRH entries (see further (Sullivan et al., 2017)). Second, these entries helped us refine our unit of analysis and our method of data collection: namely, smaller and more discrete units are better. When working with contributors and soliciting entries for the DRH, it is better to think precisely and with more particularity, creating entries for individual data-points rather than for larger wholes.

That being said, DRH editors such as myself are sympathetic to the impulses that spurred the “Mediterranean Religion” entries. As already noted, the question of how to demarcate Mediterranean *religion(s)* is a live scholarly debate, and entries such as the broadly defined “Mediterranean Religion” reflect the informed intuitions of many historians. Herein lies a very concrete application of the DRH project, which is the recognition that once enough precise data-points (either “groups,” or in subsequent polls, “texts,” “places,” “supernatural beings,” and “rituals”) have been collected, we can begin to conduct quantitative analyses so as to determine if we are in fact justified in speaking of Mediterranean *religion* (in the singular). Individual data-

points can be meaningfully analysed, compared, and collected, and eventually a larger picture of ancient Mediterranean religiosity will begin to emerge. Ultimately such analyses will integrate within the qualitative approaches that already permeate the study of history. At present our scholarly intuition suggests we are justified in speaking of Mediterranean *religion* (in the singular); with the DRH we will be able either to bolster, reformulate, or reject our intuitions in favour of more robust and complete analyses.

I have sought in this essay to outline a specific, concrete historical problem, and then to show how a tool such as the DRH can help address that problem. Though I have outlined a problem that is not rooted in or even germane to cognitive historiography proper, I nevertheless consider cognitive historiography to open new avenues for exploring the problematic outlined above. Indeed, there are very few scholarly forums in which the digital humanities, statistical analyses, and other quantitative approaches to history can find an interdisciplinary home. Cognitive historiography is one of the few fields that encourages—better, requires—this kind of cross-disciplinary engagement (Xygalatas, 2014). It is precisely the interdisciplinarity of cognitive historiography that facilitates the kind of methodological novelty and scholarly exploration needed to examine dynamics of ancient Mediterranean religiosity. As the DRH project continues to develop and expand, it promises to become a powerful analytical tool by which to amass large amounts of intellectual production, and further to subject that volume to rigorous tests that integrate within and further existing research initiatives. Cognitive historiography serves as the intersection at which those qualitative and quantitative analyses converge.

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